Introduction

Welcome to the MassGrad Evaluation Briefs, a series of publications written for participants in the evaluation being conducted by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI). The Briefs will share key findings from evaluation site visits, interviews, surveys, and reports. It is a high priority for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) that you receive feedback from the evaluation. Your participation has been very helpful and greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Background of the Implementation Awards

The Implementation awards are MassGrad’s largest program, awarded to 28 schools in 17 districts for 3-4 years to implement dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery programs. Each school could select from up to three out of seven designated strategies, and an extensive range of designs resulted. The seven strategies included:

1. Alternative pathways to meet a range of student needs;
2. Adult advocates for student support;
3. Positive school climate and socio-emotional systems of support;
4. Service-learning and work-based learning models;
5. Credit recovery, credit acceleration, and distance learning expansion;
6. Expansion of the school year and summer transition programs; and
7. Programs for transient students.

MassGrad’s purpose is “to substantially increase the number of students who earn a high school diploma.” The evaluation will track progress toward that goal both quantitatively (such as comparing MassGrad and non-MassGrad students) and qualitatively (such as reporting knowledge shared by program personnel). The early findings reported here are mostly qualitative.

One conclusion that UMDI can already draw, based on our 25 site visits, is that many awardee schools have used MassGrad funds to initiate and/or expand programs that show considerable promise for increasing graduation rates.

Credit Recovery, Credit Acceleration, and Distance Learning Expansion

UMDI selected credit recovery as the focus of this first evaluation brief because (a) it is the strategy that was selected by the greatest number of schools, and (b) the many variations across schools provide opportunities for sharing best practices and lessons learned.

Many schools reported that their credit recovery programs have led students to gain credits, rejoin their graduation cohorts, and graduate. The strategy appears to be achieving considerable success for most schools. It would be easy to underestimate the complexity of creating and sustaining an online credit recovery program, but interviews and observations made it clear that there are many interrelated stages and dimensions of this process that can be carried out in different ways and with different levels of success. This evaluation brief highlights some of the relevant issues identified so far.
Overview and Models

Credit recovery models of schools visited included:

1. *Teacher-led.* An after-school or summer school approach with a teacher in a classroom focusing on a single subject with a group of students who had previously been unsuccessful in the course.

2. *Online.* Students work online (in a computer lab or at home) using software provided by an external vendor or online courses developed by the school. One teacher can supervise students who are working on different courses.

3. *Blended.* The teacher actively teaches some of the course content, but then students carry out the online curriculum and are assigned credit based primarily on online assessments. Students may also be graded on offline projects, assessments, or other coursework.

The three main types of credit recovery were:

1. *Standard.* The student retakes a course that had previously been failed.

2. *On-time.* The student has failed the first part of a course, such as a semester or even a unit, and is recovering that part while completing the rest of the course in a classroom with a teacher.

3. *Accelerated.* A deeply undercredited student takes one or more future courses in an online format, such as a student who failed English 10 and hasn’t passed it yet but is taking English 11 online to avoid falling further behind.

Program Dimensions, Successes, and Challenges

**Location and timing of course offerings.** Credit recovery courses were offered in the school building during or after regular school hours, in evening community settings such as the Girls Club or an employment center, at "Saturday school" where students were making up for excessive absences, and during the summer. Some benefits and challenges of these different approaches are noted below.

- *After school.* After school was the most common option, as credit recovery didn't conflict with student course schedules, and stipended full-time teachers were able to staff the credit recovery labs after their school day. Challenges included motivating students to stay after school, providing alternative transportation, and recruiting staff.

- *During school.* Offering credit recovery during the school day was less common but enabled students to regain credits during study hall periods. One challenge was having credit recovery seats remain empty due to conflicts with students’ course schedules, but underutilized licenses are also an issue for some after-school programs.

- *Evening and weekend.* Community partnerships enabled some schools to integrate credit recovery into out-of-school activities in which students were already participating. These collaborations require structures for clear communication between the daytime school and the cooperating programs.

**Staffing and the role of the credit recovery teacher.** The most common approach was to employ teachers who already taught full-time in the school, providing them with stipends to staff credit recovery classrooms after school. In some schools, one teacher or administrator served as the coordinator and managed registration and scheduling, addressed teachers’ needs and concerns, and ensured that stipended teachers came from multiple disciplines in order to support students’ different course needs. Some schools reported that it was challenging for some teachers to sustain this after-school role due to their other after-school professional responsibilities such as grading and lesson planning. Each teacher only works a small number of hours, which makes this approach inefficient in terms of the total amount of training needed and time spent developing skills in deploying the software and managing the lab.
One school had a teacher with many years of classroom experience whose full-time role was to staff the credit recovery lab during the school day, and this appeared to provide advantages related to her software expertise and depth of engagement in credit recovery. In addition to carrying out the core tasks needed to enable students to use the software, she also reported using an array of strategies to bring students into the program and foster their success. These included frequent communication with administrators and teachers to make sure that eligible students were referred for credit recovery, establishing supportive relationships with students, and calling them at home and having their friends call them when their attendance was poor. To support students who didn’t have Internet access at home, she had printouts of curriculum materials that students could take with them to work on outside the credit recovery lab.

The credit recovery lab teacher also has a behavior management role. One interviewee said that allowing students to listen to music on headphones substantially reduced behavior issues. One school reported that the logistics of dealing with 24 students while multiple staff circulate and provide assistance creates substantial activity and talking, which can be distracting for students. In multiple schools, graduation coaches sometimes supported their students in the credit recovery lab.

**Student selection.** Policies differed across schools for determining student eligibility for credit recovery, although in all cases it was based on students having failed courses or parts of courses or being behind on credit accumulation. In most cases, students had to have taken and failed the course in the classroom setting before being eligible for credit recovery. Administrators and guidance counselors generally had primary responsibility for monitoring student grades and credit accumulation, although graduation coaches and other support personnel sometimes took on this role.

Demand for credit recovery seats exceeded supply in some schools. One school in this situation strongly favored students for whom the recovered credits would be sufficient to meet graduation requirements. Another school rescinded seats from students who failed to come to the recovery lab at least two hours per week. One school with a very high dropout rate gave precedence to students who had already achieved 10th-grade status, because they had “shown potential” to graduate, compared to some 9th-graders with minimal credit accumulation and an apparently lower chance of making good use of limited credit recovery resources. Another school offered credit recovery only to 12th graders and was expanding this to include 11th graders. Other considerations included recommendations of administrators and guidance counselors as well as the student’s apparent desire and ability to complete coursework semi-independently. Some students struggled with the independence of credit recovery, and some students’ ability to work independently improved as they grew accustomed to using the online approach.

One school’s policy was that, to participate in credit recovery, students couldn’t be concurrently receiving failing grades in other courses in the current semester, comparing this to “adding water to a sinking ship.” Another school reported that one student was so focused on succeeding in his credit recovery math classes that he neglected his other courses, concluding that “This is an example of how it is difficult to transfer the increased levels of engagement observed in the credit recovery course to other courses.” A third school required students participating in on-time recovery during second semester to attend after-school extra help with the teacher whose course they had failed first semester and were now recovering.

**Student engagement and retention.** Many schools reported successes and challenges related to student attendance and engagement with credit recovery courses. Most reports were that credit recovery was popular with students because of flexible scheduling, the emphasis on self-pacing rather than seat time, the ability to revisit lessons and take assessments multiple times, and being able to test out of units where the content had already been mastered.

Many sites reported that their credit recovery programs have led students to gain credits, rejoin their graduation cohorts, and graduate.
One school whose program was struggling said that they had provided only minimal scaffolding for students’ credit recovery work. Their process was to tell students that they had been assigned to credit recovery and that they could work at home or in the lab. Most students opted to work from home and made minimal progress. The school recognized that some students were becoming discouraged when they couldn’t figure out aspects of the software and were receiving little assistance. This school reported hiring a credit recovery coordinator and moving toward putting additional structures in place such as providing clear written procedures for students, working with students to set progress deadlines, actively building relationships with students, and assigning a staff member to follow up with each student.

Additional strategies that schools reported using to increase student engagement included:

- Holding occasional after-school social events with participating students.
- Requiring students to complete one course before starting another, because that way students moved more quickly toward completion and were motivated by their faster progress.
- Encouraging students who had been successful in credit recovery courses to tell other students about their experiences.
- Asking parents for assistance in promoting student effort and attendance. One school sent letters to parents when the student signed up for credit recovery, explaining the required commitment and the potential benefits. Another school asked parents (and students) to sign a credit recovery contract.
- Enlisting graduation coaches to check on the credit recovery attendance and progress of their assigned students, and spending some time with students in the credit recovery lab.
- Providing a late bus or city bus pass for students engaged in after-school credit recovery.

A final challenge noted by one school is that some ELL students struggle with online credit recovery because it is highly dependent on English language skills. Two schools noted that Plato lessons are available in Spanish, which helps many students, and that the software can read documents out loud so that students can listen on headphones (which also helps students with reading challenges). One school reported that even students who use Plato’s Spanish-language resources are required to complete assessments in English.

**Course offerings.** Most schools focused their credit recovery resources on core courses (i.e., math, ELA, history, science), because these were the courses most responsible for students not graduating. One school reported focusing on elective courses. Some schools reported that, before offering a course, they enlisted curriculum coordinators to align the vendor’s modules with the school’s curriculum. This involved determining whether course content was adequate to meet school standards as well as excluding vendor modules that weren’t required by the school. One school reported that conducting this alignment required 10-15 hours per course.

**Staff acceptance and approval of credit recovery.** Challenges to the acceptance of credit recovery as a valid curricular approach were mentioned in several interviews, although no school reported this as a major problem. One respondent said, “This is starting to wane in our district. But anytime you offer this type of programming, initially you are going to get a little bit of push back – that it’s not as rigorous of a classroom, that ‘you are taking our jobs.’” Additional arguments against credit recovery included that it provides an inferior instructional experience compared to a classroom and that it encourages bad student habits since they know they can fail and have another chance.

Interviewees were actively engaged in credit recovery and were strong advocates. They felt that many teachers gained greater appreciation for and confidence in online credit recovery once they became more familiar with it, such as by visiting the credit recovery lab, seeing that students had indeed learned the required course content, and learning that students could recover specific units (in some schools) to avoid failing a course in progress. Some schools achieved these shifts by having administrators and teachers actively promote credit recovery, developing materials to help teachers understand what credit recovery is, and converting course curricula to checklists that teachers could then mark off to indicate what parts students need to recover. The school
that reported creating these checklists said that Plato doesn’t provide that resource and that the school was modeling their checklists on ones they received from another district.

**Grading and credit policies.** This topic was not investigated systematically but arose during several interviews. Schools differed on the level of achievement required for students to receive credit, ranging from 60% to 80%. One school that offered on-time recovery required a Plato grade of 70% or above for the first semester (which was being recovered), and then averaged that grade with the second-semester grade that the student earned in the teacher-led classroom. This meant that if the student’s second semester grade was 50% and their Plato grade was 70%, then the two semesters averaged to 60%, and the student received credit for the year-long course. One school also mentioned a limit on how many credits could be earned through credit recovery, which was one third of the total credits required for graduation.

Some schools reported “locking” all the course assessments, so that students could only take them in the laboratory, with the teacher’s permission, rather than being able to access them from home. This was due to concerns about cheating when the test was taken at home. Two schools reported that Plato’s default settings are to have the assessments unlocked, and that the locking needs to be conducted one assessment and one student at a time, which can be time-consuming, particularly at the beginning of a semester when it needs to be done for many students at once.

**Cost and utilization.** Several districts expressed concerns about the high cost of online credit recovery licenses and the ability to sustain participation after MassGrad funding ended. Several districts also reported that they had credit recovery waiting lists, due to demand exceeding available licenses, while other districts were not fully utilizing the licenses they were paying for.

**Conclusions**

Credit recovery appears to have broad appeal among students and administrators, as well as increasing appeal among teachers. It has provided an opportunity for students who have failed courses or parts of courses to accumulate additional credits and sometimes to catch up with their graduation cohort, thereby reducing the high dropout risk factor of having to repeat an entire grade. Because online credit recovery models are based on demonstrated competencies rather than seat time, pre-assessments enable students to skip areas they have already mastered and regain credit quickly if they devote the needed time and effort. For students who missed graduating by just one or two course credits, credit recovery can permit them to graduate without spending an entire additional year in school. Credit recovery also provides flexibility for students whose attendance is irregular. Credit recovery has clearly become an important strategy for schools attempting to increase graduation rates, and information from MassGrad awardees is providing important information about how to run credit recovery programs effectively.